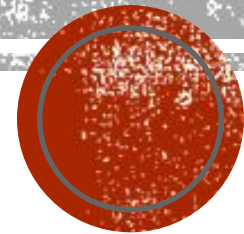


# THE SYMBOLIC FRAME

**What is perceived, is real.**



# ASSUMPTIONS OF THE SYMBOLIC FRAME

- What is most important is not what happens but what it means.
- Activity & meaning are loosely coupled; events have multiple meanings because people interpret experience differently.
- In the face of widespread uncertainty & ambiguity, people create symbols to resolve confusion, increase predictability, find direction, & anchor hope and faith.
- Many events & processes are more important for what is expressed than what is produced.
- Culture is the glue that holds an organization together & unites people around shared values & beliefs.



# OBSERVATIONS ABOUT THE SYMBOLIC FRAME

- It forms a conceptual umbrella for ideas from a variety of disciplines, including organizational theory, sociology, & political science.
- It seeks to interpret & illuminate basic issues of meaning & belief that make symbols so powerful.
- It sees life as more serendipitous than linear.
- It sees meaning as the basic human need.
- It encourages us to see organizations as theater & organizational activities as dramaturgical performances played to both internal & external audiences.
- It views structures & processes as secular theater—drama that expresses our fears, joys, & expectations.
- It sees play, ritual, ceremony, and myth as essential to high performing teamwork.



Culture is a pattern of shared basic assumptions that a group learned as it solved its problems of external adaptation and integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and therefore to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems. (Schein, 1992)

Culture is the way we do things around here. (Deal & Kennedy, 1982)

Culture is the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one human group from another. (Hofstede, 1984)

Culture is the interwoven pattern of beliefs, values, practices, & artifacts that defines for members who they are and how they are to do things. (Bolman & Deal)



# DIMENSIONS OF NATIONAL CULTURE

BY GEERT HOFSTEDE, 1984

1. *Power Distance*: A measure of power inequality between bosses & subordinates
2. *Uncertainty Avoidance*: The level of comfort or discomfort with uncertainty & ambiguity
3. *Individualism*: The importance of the individual versus the collective
4. *Masculinity-femininity*: A measure of male dominance



# LEADING BY LEVERAGING CULTURE

J.A. CHATMAN & S.E. CHA, *CALIFORNIA MANAGEMENT REVIEW*,  
VOL.45, NO. 4, SUMMER 2003, PP.20-33

- Culture must be *strategically relevant*
  - **Employees have to be freed up from rules in order to deliver fully on strategic objectives**
  - **They have to understand the ultimate strategic goals & the norms through which they can be successfully achieved**
  - **They must care about reaching those goals & what their coworkers think if they don't**
  
- The culture must be *strong*
  - **There is a high level of agreement among employees about what is valued**
  - **There is a high level of intensity about the values**



# LEADING BY LEVERAGING CULTURE (2)

- The content of organizational culture must contain innovation
  - Hiring creative people is usually stressed
  - Brainstorming designed to publicly raise creative ideas
  - Norms that support risk-taking and change may be key
  - Create an environment where team members are safe to take interpersonal risks
  - Leaders must move quickly to implement new ideas



# LEADERSHIP TOOLS TO MANAGE & CHANGE CULTURE

- **Recruiting & selecting people for culture fit**
  - Will the firm's culture be rewarding for the potential recruit?
  - Send recruiters who demonstrate the norms desired
  - Ensure things like the web site convey cultural norms
- **Managing culture through socialization & training**
  - Ensure that employees acquire cultural knowledge
  - Ensure that they bond with one another
- **Managing culture through the reward system**
  - Culture is the informal reward system & needs to be connected to the formal one
  - Rewards need to be clear, consistent & comprehensive





One thing is guaranteed: A culture will form in an organization, a department, and a work group. The question is whether the culture that forms is one that helps or hinders the organization's ability to execute its strategic objectives. Organizational culture is too important to leave to chance; organizations must use their culture to fully execute their strategy and inspire innovation. It is a leader's primary role to develop and maintain an effective culture.

**(Chatman & Cha, 2003, p.32)**



# SYMBOLS AND CULTURE

- Symbols are the basic building blocks of the meaning systems, or cultures, that we inhabit.
- Symbols embody and express an organization's culture.
- Symbols most clearly communicate an organization's culture.
- Symbolic forms play distinctive cultural roles in organizations.



# MYTHS, VISION, AND VALUES

- *Myths*, operating at the deepest reaches of consciousness, are the story behind the story.
- *Vision* turns an organization's core ideology, or sense of purpose, into an image of what the future might become.
- *Values* define what an organization stands for.



# HEROES AND HEROINES

Heroes come in every shape and size;

Adding something very special to others in their lives

No one gives you medals and the world won't know your name

But in Southwest's eyes you're heroes just the same



# STORIES AND FAIRY TALES

Fairy tales and stories offer comfort, reassurance, direction, and hope to people of all ages. They externalize inner conflicts and tensions, convey information, morals, values, and myths vividly and convincingly. They keep the historical exploits of heroes and heroines alive.



# RITUAL

- Ritual gives structure and meaning to daily life.
- Humans create both personal and communal rituals.
- The paradox of ritual patterns and sacred habits is that they simultaneously serve as a solid footing and springboard, providing a stable dynamic in our lives.
- Historically, cultures have relied on ritual and ceremony to create order, clarity, and predictability.
- Initiation is an important role of ritual.



# CEREMONY

- Ceremonies are grander, more elaborate, less frequent occasions than rituals.
- Ceremonies punctuate our lives at special moments.
- Ceremonies socialize, stabilize, reassure, and convey messages to external constituencies.
- Ceremony is evident in matters of national importance



# METAPHOR, HUMOR, AND PLAY

- Metaphors compress complicated issues into understandable images, influencing our attitudes, evaluations, and actions.
- Humor is a device for distancing, but it can socialize, include, and convey membership.
- Play encourages experimentation, flexibility, and adaptiveness.





# ORGANIZATION AS THEATRE

- The symbolic frame views structures and processes as secular theater—drama that expresses our fears, joys, and expectations.
- The symbolic frame approaches structure as stage design: an arrangement of space, lighting, props, and costumes that make the drama vivid and credible to its audience.



# ORGANIZATIONAL PROCESS AS THEATER

- *Meetings* serve as symbolic arenas to help prevent individual and organizational disintegration.
- *Planning* is a ceremony an organization must conduct periodically to maintain legitimacy.
- *Evaluation* ensures a responsible, serious, and well-managed image.



# ORGANIZATIONAL PROCESS AS THEATER-2

- *Collective bargaining* is where labor and management meet and confer to reshape divisive standoffs into workable agreements.
- *Power* is usually viewed as a tangible attribute that individuals or systems possess; but power is inherently ambiguous.



# ORGANIZATIONAL PROCESS AS THEATER-3

Questions to ask in the play called *change* :

1. What was expressed?
2. What was attracted?
3. What was legitimized?



# ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE IN ACTION

Prescriptions and theories for developing better teamwork abound in management literature. But they often miss the deeper secret of how groups and teams reach the state of grace and peak performance.... In the field of group endeavor, you will see incredible events in which the group performs far beyond the sum of its individual talents. It happens in the symphony, in the ballet, in the theater, in sports, and equally in business. It is easy to recognize and impossible to define. It is a mystique. It cannot be achieved without immense effort, training, and cooperation, but effort, training, and cooperation alone rarely create it.

**Schlesinger, Eccles, & Gabarro, 1983, p. 173**



# TENETS OF THE SYMBOLIC FRAME THAT APPLY TO ANY GROUP OR TEAM

- How someone becomes a group member is important
- Diversity supports a team's competitive advantage
- Example, not command, holds a team together
- A specialized language fosters cohesion and commitment
- Stories carry history & values & reinforce group identity



# TENETS OF THE SYMBOLIC FRAME THAT APPLY TO ANY GROUP OR TEAM

- Humor and play reduce tension and encourage creativity
- Ritual and ceremony lift spirits and reinforce values
- Informal cultural players make contributions disproportionate to their formal role
- Soul is the secret of success



Symbolic perspectives question traditional views that building a team mainly means finding the right people and designing an appropriate structure. The essence of high performance is spirit. If we were to banish play, ritual, ceremony, and myth, we would destroy teamwork, not enhance it. ... Managers are inescapably accountable for budget and bottom line; they have to respond to individual needs, legal requirements, and economic pressures. ... It is both a search for the spirit within and creation of a community of believers united by shared faith and shared culture. Peak performance emerges as a team discovers its soul.

Bolman and Deal, pp. 298-299

